

Mobile Suit Gundam: Noble Rogues

by ApeUnit

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Mobile Suit Gundam: Noble Rogues

Mogadishu Nights

****Mogadishu, Africa, Earth****

****April 0079UC:****

The night was calm and quiet. A strong breeze blew through the city from the sea. Corporal Bukowski stood nervously, as he tried to light his cigarette. In his charge were eight Zeon prisoners of war. The beleaguered prisoners were captured earlier that day, in the heavy street to street fighting that tore through Mogadishu.

One of the Zeon soldiers noticed Bukowski, as he fumbled with the lighter. The Zeon soldier rose to his feet and moved toward the Corporal. Bukowski looked up and noticed the light from a small flame. The flame came from a lighter held outstretched by the Zeon soldier. He held it steady, with a cupped hand sheltering the flame, long enough for Bukowski to light his cigarette. It was an act of thoughtfulness, especially from the enemy, that Bukowski had not expected.

"Bukowski!" a voice called out, surprising the young Corporal.

Lieutenant Horatio Leighton entered the bombed out room where the prisoners were kept under guard. He was a young Lieutenant, commissioned at the war's onset and only twenty-five years old. One side of his face made him look like the poster model of a Federation soldier. He was clean cut, firm jaw, commanding blue eyes, and combed short hair. The left side of his face bore his literal battle scar, a deep gash that started above his left brow and ran vertically down

his cheek almost to his jaw line. In his right hand and held at his side was the Lieutenant's M72A1 assault service rifle, the standard issue bullpup rifle of the Earth Federation Ground Forces.

"What the hell is going on here!?" Leighton demanded.

"Umâ€|sir. Nothing sir!" Bukowski managed, as he awkwardly stood at attention.

Leighton made his way to where Bukowski and the Zeon soldier stood. The Lieutenant grabbed the Zeon soldier by the shirt and threw him to the ground.

"Back in line you fuckin' Zeke!" Leighton shouted.

Bukowski could smell the alcohol; the Lieutenant had been drinking.

"Sir, I have things under control here," Bukowski said, in an effort to mitigate the inebriated behavior.

"Shut your fuckin' face, Bukowski!" Leighton said, while he shoved a cautionary finger toward the Corporal.

"Good God, no wonder they're losing this war," a Zeon prisoner spoke up. "When they're led by a drunken officer corps."

The rage was palpable when Leighton turned toward the group of prisoners. A few of them felt a genuine sense of fear when they looked in the enraged Lieutenant's eyes.

"Who fucking said that?!" Leighton demanded.

There was a silence from the group of prisoners. Perhaps it might have been a poor choice to upset the drunken Lieutenant with the loaded weapon. Bukowski was a bit slower to recognize what was happening. The Lieutenant was a formidable man who held the higher rank. His orders were to be obeyed.

"Bukowski!" Leighton shouted.

"Sir!" Bukowski said, as he turned.

"I need you check in with Sergeant Tupolev. I need his report on who he is assigning to the day shift patrols."

"But sir, I am supposed to be guarâ€|"

"Is there a problem here, Corporal," Leighton interrupted.

Bukowski was backed into a metaphorical corner. He was only sixteen years old; drafted into this war because the Federation needed every able bodied citizen to fight. He ended up as a Corporal simply because he was the only member of his squad to survive a Zeon attack during the retreat at the Golan Heights.

"I have things under control here," Leighton said in a reassuring tone. "Get that report from Tupolev!"

The only thing to do was salute, which Bukowski did. It was a mixture

of the naïveté of youth and the Lieutenant's intimidation that caused Bukowski to leave. There was one last stand to attention on the part of Bukowski before he turned and departed. He made his way out of the bombed out building and onto the street. This was a section of the city controlled by the Federation well behind the front line. There was no fear of snipers in this area at least, that caused a sigh of relief from the Corporal. Not more than a minute had passed before Bukowski could hear automatic weapons fire from the bombed out building, from where he left Lieutenant Leighton alone with the prisoners.

The entire magazine of the weapon had been expended. A glow of satisfaction radiated from Leighton's face. A heap of dead Zeon lay at his feet. He did indeed feel very proud of himself. However, there was movement. A Zeon, bloodied and bullet marked, pulled himself onto his elbows. The man had somehow survived the hail of automatic fire. The surviving Zeon stared back at Leighton with a face that begged for mercy. Leighton possessed no such sympathy. The Lieutenant pulled his service pistol from his holster. With the sidearm aimed directly at the Zeon prisoner's head, Leighton squeezed the trigger. The impact of the round threw the man's head back and his body slumped to the ground.

Corporal Bukowski rushed into the bombed out building. He was met by the ghastly scene of the dead prisoners. Leighton could only offer a shrug as an explanation, as he exited and left the Corporal alone with the slaughter.

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The Medea transport came in low over the Indian Ocean. Its landing site was the Federation Base at the Mogadishu Airport. The transport flew in an evasive pattern; the pilots had learned quickly that the Zakus liked to direct their weapons fire on incoming planes. Part of the incoming flight route took them over Zeon lines for a few perilous moments. Within a few minutes, the Medea touched down on the runway, only met by two bursts of enemy Zaku fire. Federation ground crew directed the transport, as it taxied to the fortified terminal building.

Naoko Takagi sat calmly as the transport made its perilous landing, his stoic demeanor showed his collectiveness. In his lap was tucked his copy of Clausewitz's On War. He was a recently commissioned officer, advanced to the rank of Captain. A graduate of the Federation's Space Academy at Baikonur, he had ambitions of a career in Federal military service aboard one of the fleet's space cruisers. Instead, Takagi was hastily commissioned and ordered to the East African Front, his training completed in Johannesburg after the fall of Baikonur.

The orders in Takagi's possession simply stated he was to assume command on Noble Company. Noble Company was the twelfth company attached to the 7th Regiment of the 5th Army's 8th Brigade, in a fire support role. This meant they were issued anti-armor rockets and ordered to seek out enemy Zaku's for destruction. Noble Company pursued this objective at a heavy cost. Takagi knew he was to assume command from the company's acting commander, Lieutenant Leighton.

The transport rolled gracefully to a stop at the designated spot. The

ground crew acted quickly and chocked the transport's wheels. The loading ramp was opened to allow the passengers to disembark. Takagi stepped out, his enthusiasm was shadowed by the subdued expression of duty that shown on his face. The sun was starting to rise over the Indian Ocean. Its rays blanketed the costal runway in a morning haze. The city could have been regarded as almost scenic.

The tranquility was interrupted the screech of a pair of FF-3 Saberfish fighter jets, as they throttled their engines and took off in formation. The jets banked right and skimmed low across the city; flying as close to the tops of the buildings in order to avoid enemy radar targeting systems. It was sight that energized Takagi. His years at the Academy and the accelerated combat training had readied him for this.

The soldiers disembarking the Medea, all replacements for depleted units, were directed into the main passenger terminal. Terminal One of the Aden Adde International Airport was a scene of horror and pandemonium. The wounded from the battle for Mogadishu were strewn throughout the passenger waiting areas. They were tended to by a handful of overburdened and poorly supplied medical staff. Left and right the wounded screamed agony, their cries echoing through the terminal. Blood collected in puddles; runoff from the wounds of the dying. Takagi held his composure, clinging to his military discipline. The other replacements that had disembarked were quickly losing their own. Their faces bore the expression of panic.

A line of medics lifted stretchers of the critically wounded. They were to board the Medea for immediate transport to more suitable medical facilities. Shouts were heard from the runway and Takagi and the others looked to see the source. A mass Federation soldiers ran at full speed toward the transport, in an effort to force their way onboard. They were so numerous that their effort to climb aboard could only swap the transport. The desperation of these men to desert their posts and flee the battle only further served to unnerve the replacements. An overwhelmed contingent of MP's tried in vain to stem the tide and force the soldiers away from the Medea.

"Captain Takagi!?" a voice called with inquiry.

Takagi spotted a young Corporal, who looked to be scanning the group of arrivals. He made his way over to the voice. The Corporal snapped to attention and saluted his superior. Takagi returned the salute.

"Corporal?" Takagi asked, expecting a response.

"Bukowski, sir!" the Corporal replied. "I received orders from battalion headquarters to meet you here and bring you to our lines."

The Captain nodded in acknowledgement. He handed his rucksack to Bukowski's outstretched hand and followed the Corporal out of the Terminal. On the stretch of road in front of the Terminal, where taxis had once discharged passengers, lines of ambulances deposited the wounded. Bukowski lead his new Captain to a parked M72 Lakota jeep, complete with a gunner manning the M229 machine gun.

"Had to bring a gunner," Bukowski explained. "They steal vehicles if you leave them unattended. The Lieutenant would kill me if I lost the

Noble Company's jeep."

The way Takagi could respond was with a quizzical expression on his face. Bukowski placed the Captain's bag in the rear of the jeep and climbed into the driver's seat. The motor fired up and the jeep took off, once Takagi had taken his seat.

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The war had been going disastrously for the Earth Federation. On every front, the Federation's ground forces were in retreat. Zeon's deployment of their mobile suits had proved highly effective. There simply was no weapon in the Federation's arsenal to effectively counter the Zaku.

The 5th Federation Army had been initially tasked with defending the Eastern Mediterranean. In the month since the Zeon invasion, the 5th Army had been driven from their headquarters in Istanbul to their current position in Mogadishu. With their backs to the sea, the Federal soldiers dug in and turned the city into a fortress. If the Zeon wanted it, they would have to pay a high price for every street; for every block and building. For the first time in their war, the front line had stabilized for the soldiers of the 5th Army. The urban environment severely hampered the tactical advantage of the Zaku's high mobility. Strategically placed Federation rocket teams had set about ambushing Zakus. Firing their anti-armor rockets from bombed out buildings; they had managed to destroy a few of the Zeon mobile suits and forced the Zeon to rethink their strategy.

The Battle for Mogadishu was entering its third week. The 5th Federation Army was severely depleted in terms of men and material; they were exhausted. The Zeon force, while it outnumbered the Federation force, was dangerously overstretched. The initial advance had turned out to be more successful than previously anticipated. The danger for the Zeon African Front lay in the fact they had not incorporated the success into their resupply plans.

Orbital landing zones, to receive supplies from the space fleet, had been preselected in areas throughout Turkey, Palestine, and Egypt. Once these areas had been captured, Zeon engineers began work, according to the prearranged plans, constructing landing sites and establishing supply depots. The strategists on Side 3 expected to still be engaging Federation forces in the Sinai; splitting their retreat between Asia and Africa. However, that was not the case. The Federation 5th Army's resistance deteriorated, in most part due to the effectiveness of the Zakus. Now, they were pushed to Mogadishu where they made their stand.

The Zeon were now in the midst of a siege with the Federation for control of Mogadishu. The engineering corps of the Zeon force was actively surveying suitable areas to construct orbital landing zones, but this was taking time. To receive a landing vehicle from low Earth orbit, the engineers had to find a landing site with suitable terrain and construct the necessary facilities. These included placing navigational beacons for the descending craft as well as calculating the landing trajectories. The orbiting spacecraft would have to adjust their orbits as required to hit the drop zones.

At this point in the Battle for Mogadishu, the orbiting Zeon ships were still aligned to drop on the selected targets in Turkey,

Palestine, and Egypt. Supplies to reach the Zeon force that besieged Mogadishu had to be unpacked from the landing capsules and loaded onto either transport aircraft or trucks. They then had to travel the vast distances to the Zeon front lines. The entire time the supply transports were targeted by audacious Federation fighter pilots, who undertook daring raids deep behind the enemy's lines to strike at the convoys.

The advance to Mogadishu had been successfully detrimental. The Zeon high command presumed the battered 5th Federation Army had no fight left and its destruction inevitable. The needs of conflicts on other fronts required Zeon soldiers to be diverted from the Mogadishu siege and sent elsewhere. Civilians in some overrun population centers began to mount an insurgency against the Zeon invaders. This required even more troops to be pulled from the front to secure Cairo, Tel Aviv, Damascus, and Istanbul, to name a few. And so, the days past and the Federations 5th Army faced a weakening opponent. All they had to do was wait for their opportunity.

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Lieutenant Leighton sat inverted in the cockpit of the downed Zaku. Noble Company brought down the enemy's mobile suit a few days prior, in the heart of the Bakaaraha Market. The Zaku had gotten turned around when out on patrol. Leighton and other members of Noble Company were tasked with guarding this section of the city. When the Zaku wandered into their sector, they hit it with a well targeted barrage of anti-armor rockets. The Zaku saw its knees blown off; the goliath lumbered as it came crashing down over the roof of a shop. The machine lay with its back arched over the shop, its head in the ground, and its chest facing upward.

The way the mobile suit was positioned meant one had to sit upside down when in the pilot's seat. Leighton was in there. He had hardly left the Zaku since he and his men shot it down. Every waking off-duty hour was spent going through the Zaku's computer; leaning how the Zaku operated, how to operate the Zaku, how to find the Zaku's weaknesses. Leighton was an engineer before the war, so he was as good as any to do what he was doing. He had his reliable MIL-Book rugged laptop computer, from his pre-war orbital work, plugged into the Zaku. The MIL-Book downloaded the Zaku's data and ran algorithms. The hours he would spend sitting upside down caused Leighton severe headaches. The headaches were remedied by his already problematic drinking habit.

The jeep with Bukowski and the new Captain pulled up to the ruined Zaku. Sergeant Tupolev stood on the ground. He leaned into the cockpit and assisted Leighton with the data analysis. Upon seeing the arrival of the Captain, Tupolev snapped to attention and announced the superior's arrival to all within close earshot. Leighton seemed disinterested, as Takagi exited the jeep. The Captain promptly returned Tupolev's salute.

"I'm looking for Lieutenant Leighton," Takagi said.

"You found him," Leighton responded, though not taking himself away from his work.

"I am Captain Takagi, and I am to assume command of Noble Company."

"Good for you," said Leighton.

"Is this any way to address your superior!? Where is the Regimental CP?" Takagi demanded, a bit disgusted by Leighton's attitude.

At this point, Leighton looked up from his work. He sized up his new Captain, and pointed. There was ruined building across the block from where they stood. The top corner looked like it had been hit by a large rocket. The section was charred black from an explosion and a large part of was simply missing.

"Regimental was there yesterday," Leighton said cynically, as he pointed to the destroyed part of the building.

It was evident that the regiment's commander and their staff had been vaporized. It was just a lucky shot on the part of the Zeon.

"So who is in command?" inquired Takagi.

"The hell if I know," Leighton replied, as he turned his focus back to the ruined Zaku's computer.

"Where is Noble Company billeted? What are our numbers?" Takagi demanded.

"There's myself, Sergeant Tupolev," Leighton started. "Bukowski and Miller gave you the ride here. Chen, Thompson, and Nguesso better be cleaning the launcher like a told them to. Do we count Johansen? He got himself blow in half taking a message to the Regimental CP. Guess not? That's about it. We lost thirty men taking this Zaku down, including your predecessor, Captain Mitchell."

Takagi was a shocked by Leighton's attitude, even more by the casualties. A fire-support company was supposed to number eighty men. Leighton had accounted for seven. The Lieutenant unlatched the seat restraint and gripped a bar on the panel in front of him. He let himself fall out of the chair and swung forward on the bar until he landed on the ground. Now, Captain Takagi and Lieutenant Leighton were face to face. The hot sun blanketed the area in its rays of heat.

"By your leave sir," Leighton said with a demented smile.

The flexing of the muscles in Leighton's face caused tension on the skin around the scar. The wound began to open in places. It was a recent addition and had not yet fully healed. Leighton turned away, with Sergeant Tupolev in close pursuit, taking the MIL-Book of collected Zaku data.

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It was eerie calm this night on the front line. The echoes of gunfire elsewhere in the city could be heard, but there was none here. The demarcation between the Zeon besiegers and Federation defenders was more or less the Jidka Sodonka. The Jidka Sodonka was a road that ran east to west and divided the city of Mogadishu between the factions. The Federation soldiers named the street, "Zeon Avenue".

Leighton was on the top floor of a three story building on the

northern edge of the Bakaaraha Market. He held a pair of night vision binoculars and was flanked by Captain Takagi to his right and Sergeant Tupolev to his left. On the floor below, Bukowski and Chen were attaching the rocket tube to its mount. Nguesso, Thompson and Miller were doing the same in another section of the building.

The Zeon had been launching nightly reconnaissance missions to test the Federation lines. If the Zeon force had been at full strength, they could have easily launched a frontal attack and overrun the hopelessly outnumbered Federation soldiers. However, the Zeon had fewer men to spare thanks mostly to their own commanders diverting materials elsewhere. They still significantly outnumbered the Federation 5th Army, but could not afford the cost of a full frontal assault. The attack would have to be coordinated and strike at a weak point in the Federation's line. That weak point exploited and hole punched through the defensive line; the Zeon crushes the 5th Army in Mogadishu.

The relative quiet was interrupted by a distant thud, and then another. One thud and then one that increased in volume, something big was approaching. Over a distant building to their front, Leighton spotted the Zaku through his binoculars. It was a goliath of a machine, over seventeen meters in height. The Zaku was covered on either side by advancing Zeon infantry.

"We got one big-boy," Leighton said into the radio. "Wait for my signal. Bukowski, you have the pilot's compartment. Thompson, you cripple the knee so Bukowski can have his shot."

There was a radio acknowledgement from both Bukowski and Thompson. Leighton then went on to address the other Federation soldiers in the area of operation.

"Fox Company," Leighton started. "We have the Zaku sighted. Hold fire until we engage and then open up on their infantry."

This was the new Federation urban warfare strategy. The Zeon had come to believe the Jidka Sodonka was the separation between their two forces. Their Federation counterparts regarded it less so. The strategy would be to lure Zeon forces into Federation controlled territory. This was accomplished by either, engaging the Zeon and then falling back in order to elicit a pursuit, or simply to lure them in by an apparent absence. The Federation soldiers would conceal themselves in the buildings and let the Zeon pass by. The Zakus, between the closely constructed buildings, had next to no room to maneuver. Even a small torso rotation would often get caught in a collision with a building or take longer than expected because the pilot needed to lift the mobile suit's arms out of the way. Once the Federation rocket teams had a clear line of fire, the attack was initiated. Noble Company had scored three Zaku kills, including the one in the Market, and severely crippled another. However, the latter had managed to escape back to Zeon lines.

The tactic Leighton was studying required two almost instantaneous strikes on a Zaku mobile suit. One rocket fired was a kinetic energy round designed to target a vulnerable joint area on the mobile suit, the knee for instance. The compact kinetic energy missile would collide with the knee mechanisms and blow them apart, thus rendering the mobile suit stationary. Although stationary, the Zaku is still dangerous. The second rocket fired, known as an inferno rocket,

contained a shape charge high explosive warhead designed to melt a small hole through the armor that covered the Zaku's cockpit. The exploding warhead propels a jet of molten metal into the cockpit's interior and incinerates the pilot. The term was coldly referred to as, "no pilot, no Zaku." This strategy was refined heavily since the first Zaku Noble Company brought down, the one in the Bakaaraha Market. To bring that one down, Noble Company fired nearly twenty rockets at the Zaku's leg joints.

The towering olive drab Zaku lumbered closer to their position. Leighton was prone on top of the building and estimated the range to target.

"Zaku, 500 meters," Leighton said.

The Zeon mobile suit advanced toward Noble Company's position. There were two columns of Zeon infantry on either side. A few moments passed, though it had the feeling of an eternity. Even the most calm and collected of the Federation soldiers could feign their expression, but inside they experienced terror. The Zakus were terror weapons.

"Zaku, 400 meters," Leighton spoke over the radio. "We blast that fucker at 300."

Then the unexpected happened, the Zaku came to a halt.

"Come on," Leighton said, talking to himself but out loud. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"What's going on Lieutenant?" Takagi asked, as here peered through his own set of binoculars.

"Did they spot us?" Tupolev said, in his thick accent.

"I don't know," Leighton responded; it was clear he was becoming frustrated.

One of the Zeon soldiers on the street had approached the Zaku's left foot. He looked to be an officer. The Zeon officer opened a small panel on the foot and picked up a phone receiver. The receiver allowed him to directly communicate with Zaku's pilot. This was the opportunity the Federation soldiers needed. Takagi was one for decisiveness. He spoke over his own headset.

"Rocket teams, adjust range for 400," Takagi ordered. "Fire for effect!"

Both rocket teams immediately responded to the order. They made the quick adjustment in the weapon targeting computers and fired their ordinance. The rockets took off in a bright flash of light. There was no opportunity to respond by the time the Zeon spotted the incoming rockets. The first rocket impacted directly on target, blowing apart the Zaku's left knee joint. The pieces off flying shrapnel nearly tore the Zeon officer in half, fortunately, for him, he was killed instantly. The second rocket impacted a few seconds later in Zaku's chest, in the location of the cockpit. Leighton and Takagi had their binoculars trained on the impact site to evaluate the hit.

"Looks like a direct hit on the cockpit," Leighton announced.

"How can you be certain?" asked Takagi.

"If we missed, the Zaku would let us know. This whole building would be lit up by that thing's 120 millimeter."

The Zaku rumbled and lurched forward to the street below. There was a tremendous crash, as the mobile suit impacted into the dirt. A huge cloud of dust flew up from where the Zaku settled. The Federation soldiers of Fox Company opened fire from their positions in the surrounding buildings. They targeted the Zeon infantry, now in a panic after the loss of their Zaku. The elevated fire tore the Zeon infantry to pieces. They were exposed on the street below with little cover.

There was a squad from Fox Company positioned in the same building as Noble, in the floors below Leighton, Takagi, and Tupolev. The squad opened fire onto the street. The Zeon soldiers were effectively under an enfilade of fire. They scrambled to escape the murderous hail of lead. The fallen Zaku in the middle of the street posed a challenge, as it had to be scaled in order to pass. A few Zeon soldiers attempted to climb over the lifeless mobile suit, but their exposure made them easy targets.

The fight did not last long. It was over in less than fifteen minutes. Leighton had a grin on his face. He grabbed his helmet that was on the ground next to him, and stood up. The rocket teams were already taking down the weapon systems and stowing them for transport. The plan was to relocate the heavy weapons before an overwhelming Zeon force returned or an air strike was called.

"Goddamn it!" Leighton said in frustration.

"What is it?" Takagi asked, as Leighton's outburst seemed to come out of nowhere.

"Prisoners."

"What is the deal with prisoners?"

"They're taking them," said Leighton, as he pointed to a group of twenty Zeon with their hands in the air. "We ought to be shooting them dead where they stand. Why are we bothering to take prisoners?"

"The Antarctic Treaty stipulates full quarter be given to prisoners of war," replied Takagi.

"Since when do Zeon deserve quarter!?"

After the last retort, Leighton stormed off. He placed the helmet on his head and slung his M72A1 over his shoulder. Takagi was starting to become concerned. What exactly had Leighton inferred by his comments? Leighton, Takagi was beginning to realize, though brilliant in many ways, was trouble. Takagi knew it would be prudent to learn more about the man.

"What did he mean by that?" Takagi turned to Tupolev and asked.

"The man has cause to hate Zeon," Tupolev replied, though it was clear he was uncomfortable with the question.

"What do you mean?"

"Iâ€|It is not my place to be saying, Captain."

"What do you mean 'He has cause to hate the Zeon'? Is there something about the Lieutenant I should know about?"

Takagi felt confident he had maneuvered Tupolev into awkward position. The Sergeant, Takagi had observed, was fiercely loyal to his Lieutenant and to the chain of command. Tupolev would want to protect Leighton, but felt a duty to obey the superior. Takagi needed to know what to expect from Leighton.

"I am sorry sir," Tupolev said, he had played his hand that he would not talk. "I feel this is something you must discuss with him. I beg your leave sir to oversee the dismantlement and transport of the rocket equipment."

Tupolev snapped to attention and saluted Takagi. A gesture that Takagi returned although disappointed. Then, the Sergeant departed down the roof access stairs to where the rest of Noble Company was actively dismantling the rocket launchers.

Leighton walked along the ruined Zaku. Around him the members of Fox Company looted the dead Zeon soldiers for personal effects and rounded up those who had surrendered. The Lieutenant was transfixed by the mobile suit. The machine was a leviathan unlike anything mankind had ever built before. He had so wanted to pilot one. Not just exclusively in a combat role, but for his personal amusement. He wanted to test the mobile suit's limits, pilot it through space, and put it through an entire battery of things. It was a shame they had to use the inferno rocket to bring it down, in a way. Leighton wanted to open up the cockpit and examine the systems. The inferno round, to kill the pilot, had melted the cockpit's interior. The systems were incinerated.

A flight of four Federation FF-3 Saberfish screeched overhead. Leighton stared up at the night sky and the planes. Their arrival meant the Zeon had called in air support. Luckily, someone at the Federation air defense station was doing their job, spotted the Zeon jets, and had air assets in the area to divert for intercept. The urgency on the street increased. The soldiers scattered to get out of the open. Noble Company's jeep was parked in the alley behind the building they occupied for the fight. The crates that contained the rocket components were loaded in. Bukowski jumped into the driver's seat and Takagi into the passenger's, as Chen and Miller also climbed in the back. The Corporal put the jeep in gear and took off south toward the Bakaaraha Market.

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The dawn had come and the day was already hot. It was only April, but the temperature in Mogadishu had soared. It was unseasonably hot, even for this part of the world. The climate of Earth had taken a dramatic shift. It had been rapidly shifting ever since the Zeon had purposely crashed the colony from Side 2. The massive space colony had meant to strike a Federation military target in South America,

but it deviated from its intended course. It had slammed into Sydney and the Eastern portion of the Australian Continent ceased to exist.

Leighton was seated in the shade provided by his prized fallen Zaku in the Bakaaraha Market. In his hand was crumpled photograph of three individuals, himself, a beautiful woman he embraced, and an infant child. He gazed at the photograph with an expression of sadness. From his tactical belt, Leighton removed a small flask. He opened the top and took a drink from it. It was not long before the liquor turned his grief to anger.

Takagi was meeting with Fox Company's commander, Captain Park. It was a room in a basement situated away from the combat. There was a table in the center, around which were seated the various company commanders. Park was the natural choice to take command of the 7th Regiment, since the stray Zeon round eliminated the previous commanders. The 7th Regiment should have numbered 1100 men to be considered full strength, they had less than 400. While Federation unit commanders all over Mogadishu had issues maintaining discipline, controlling the panic mongering, and organizing effective strikes against the Zeon, Park had none of these. This may have been due to the fact she was teacher at a well to do preparatory school before the war. Maintaining discipline, whether over privileged affluent children or soldiers of an army suffering a complete morale collapse, was an area in which Park excelled.

"So we brought down a Zaku last night," Park began. "We have showed the Zeon that we can fight them, that they aren't as invincible as they had grown so accustomed. While we have demonstrated that we can change our tactics, they will most likely respond in kind with a change of their own. The key is to stay one step ahead of them." Captain Takagi, you're a studied soldier. Tell me what you think?"

"They expect us to react to their movement," replied Takagi. "This whole war we have been the ones on the run. They attack, we retreat. In the city, we wait for them and ambush them when they approach. We have maybe a short time before the Zeon come to their senses and adapt. They will eventually stop wandering through the streets blindly. Instead, they'll mass their attacks, level the buildings, leave us nowhere to hide, and overwhelm us."

"What are you suggesting we do then?" Captain Durand, Golf Company's Commander, asked.

"We attack," Takagi replied. "Nothing big, but a small incursion into Zeon lines to throw them off guard."

The whole room was quiet. This was the last thing anyone had expected. The rumors circulated that the 5th Army was to be evacuated by the Navy and relocated further south on the continent. Others suggested the 5th Army was on the verge of capitulation, and surrender was already under negotiation. Panic and defeatism had infected the 5th Army severely. They believed the Federation could no longer win the war and those left were more in favor of staying alive.

"That is suicide," interrupted Lieutenant Johnson, Able Company's Commander.

"We can't go along with this," piped in Captain Soliani, of Jolliet Company.

The commanders had devolved the conversation into senseless bickering. It was clear they were against the attack. A good many of them were more interested in holding the line until the Army's commanders negotiated the surrender. That was a very real rumor. It was taken as truth, but none could find exact confirmation. Takagi slammed a fist on the table as he stood up. This captured the attention of everyone in the room and they fell silent.

"Enough!" Takagi shouted. "The last time I checked, this was a Federation Army and not a democracy. The decision is not yours to make. Captain Park is in command of the Regiment and the decision is hers."

All of the eyes in the room shifted toward Captain Park. The fate of the soldiers under her command now rested with her decision.

"We have done enough running in this war," Park spoke to a silent audience. "However, the consensus of morale suggests an attack as a foolish gamble. Takagi does have a point, and being that he is the only professional soldier here I suggest we listen to what he has to say."

Park turned to Takagi.

"I want you to draft a plan of attack," she said. "I can allocate the use of Fox and Igloo Companies to support your plan. If I like it, I will take it to Brigade for authorization."

Takagi nodded with enthusiasm. The commanders in the room felt more relieved. They believed there was no possibility of the Brigade Commander signing off on the plan, and thus did not have to give it any more thought. Captain Park had successfully reached an outcome that satisfied both parties. The meeting continued with a briefing of revised deployments along the front. A radio station occupied by the Intelligence Corps required defending. Takagi sat there with the satisfaction that he had a chance to make a name for himself. This was the opportunity to gain his battlefield glory. The meeting was adjourned and the officers dismissed.

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It was midnight in the City of Mogadishu. Bukowski was adjusting the rocket launcher he and Chen deployed in the bombed out second floor room. The building Noble Company occupied, along with Fox and Golf Companies, was at one time a radio station. Federation military intelligence had used the satellite dishes and antennae on the roof to boost their own equipment. They were attempting to intercept Zeon radio communication amongst their ground units and signals sent from ones in orbit. Due to the nature of the work, the radio station was considered a high priority defense point. It was, however, uncomfortably close to the Zeon lines.

"Is it true?" Chen asked.

"Is what true?" Bukowski responded, confused.

"That Leighton wasted those Zekes we captured the other day."

Bukowski paused for a moment, overcome by panic. Chen immediately picked up on Bukowski's demeanor.

"So it is true," Chen said.

"I never said that," replied Bukowski.

"A fellow from Golf Company claims he found a bunch of shot up Zeke prisoners. The ones I thought Captain Mitchell left you in charge of guarding."

For the several days since the incident with Leighton and the prisoners, Bukowski had been tormented by what had happened. Perhaps confiding what he knew to Chen might be a way to alleviate the torment. He had not technically seen anything. Leighton had ordered him out of the room before actually shooting anyone. The only thing Bukowski knew for certain was the prisoners were dead and Leighton had that twisted smile on his face.

Bukowski turned to Chen. There was a loud whistling and at the same moment Chen's head flew back. The man fell to the ground, his head a bloody mess. The Zeon were launching an attack. Automatic weapons fire pummeled the facade of the radio station; taking out huge chunks of the concrete exterior with each impact. Several shoulder mounted rocket propelled grenades slammed into some of the rooms occupied by Federation soldiers. Their screams drowned out by the sound of the explosion. Bukowski hit the floor and covered his head with his hands; oblivious to the fact the helmet already preformed this task.

"Bukowski!" Leighton screamed, as he entered the room. "Get you head out of your ass and man that weapon. We got Zakus incoming."

Leighton raced to the window and took a look at the street below. There was an avenue that directly approached the radio station and terminated in a "T" intersection at the station's front door. Along it were hordes of advancing Zeon infantry supported by three Zakus. Leighton aimed his M72A1 and fired at the Zeon too close for comfort. A few fell and the rest scattered for cover. Bukowski was in a state of panic.

"Chen's hit!" Bukowski screamed. "How's he doing?"

"He's dead," Leighton said, unemotionally.

"Oh Christ! Fuck! We're all gonna die!"

It was clear Bukowski had become unnerved. The sudden death of his friend had pushed him over the edge. He curled up on the floor screaming and clutching at his shoulders. Takagi followed by Miller entered the room. Miller made his way to check on Bukowski, who he believed to be wounded.

"How the hell did they get this close?" Takagi demanded. "I thought Able Company was supposed to be on picket duty? Why didn't they report?"

"Who fucking cares at this point!?" Leighton responded. "How about we focus on holding the line."

Bukowski was in state of complete terror. He convulsed on the ground screaming and flailing about. Around the men of Noble Company in the bombed out room, bullets whizzed and impacted into the concrete. On the floors above and below, the men Fox and Golf Companies fired desperately, as they tried to hold back the Zeon onrush. The Zeon had committed a sizable infantry reserve to this attack. The street seemed consumed by a never ending flood of Zeon infantry. Takagi immediately opened up his radio channel to the Brigade command post.

"Sunray this is Noble actual," Takagi transmitted. "Are you receiving?"

"__Affirmative Noble actual, go ahead,"_ the voice over the radio responded.

"Sunray, we have three Zakus at grid Tango-Two. Zeon infantry we believe at battalion strength engaging. Requesting air support, over."

"__Negative on the air support, Noble actual. Air assets are stretched thin. Do what you can, Sunray out."_

Takagi let out a grunt of frustration. They were on their own to hold the position. In the background, Bukowski was screaming in terror. Leighton turned his attention to Bukowski in order to motivate his Corporal.

"Bukowski," Leighton yelled. "Stop acting like a fucking goddamn coward and get into this fucking fight."

"â€|they're dead," Bukowski screamed. "We're going to dieâ€|oh Christ, we're all gonna die here."

The Lieutenant shifted his attention to Miller. Miller had his arms around Bukowski, in an attempt to console the distraught teenage Corporal.

"Miller!" Leighton barked. "Get on that launcher and lineup that Zaku!"

Miller looked back at the Lieutenant; with a look that he felt his place was to care for Bukowski. Leighton returned the look with one of stern coldness. Miller instantly lay Bukowski down and moved over to the launcher. He picked up the controls and sough about ranging his target. Leighton made his way over to Bukowski. Bukowski lay on his back; his fingers nervously scratching at his chest. The Lieutenant grabbed Bukowski with his left hand and with his right; he drew his sidearm from the holster on his belt.

"Is there some fucking reason you've lost the will to fight!" Leighton shouted, as he pressed the barrel of his sidearm to Bukowski's forehead. "You can die a coward, or a man. The choice is yours!"

"Lieutenant!" Takagi yelled, clearly voicing his abject protest.

The disapproval of Takagi was flat out ignored by his Lieutenant. Bukowski stared back into the eyes of Leighton. The Lieutenant's eyes seemed to glow with rage, as if the devil himself had manifested all the anger in Hell into Leighton. The cold barrel of the sidearm burned into Bukowski's forehead. There was a long pause. It felt as though an eternity had passed for the four men in bombed out room. There was no doubt among them that Leighton would pull the trigger, this was no bluff. Bukowski realized this and capitulated. The Corporal shifted his head to signify his compliance. Leighton lowered his sidearm, and then holstered it.

"Get to it, Bukowski," Leighton ordered.

Bukowski crawled to his knees, as Leighton released his grip on the Corporal's flak jacket. The stunned Corporal crawled over to a munitions box that contained the high explosive anti-armor round. From there, he would assume his place, loading and helping direct the launcher's fire. Takagi jerked Leighton by the shoulder; spinning the Lieutenant around and into the hallway outside of the bombed out room. He wanted this next part to not be overheard by the men.

"What in God's name do you think you were doing?" Takagi demanded, his face glowing in frustration.

"Esprit de corps, Captain," Leighton replied.

"Shooting a man is your idea of motivation."

"Shooting a man for cowardice in the face of the enemy is what I was doing!"

"That is a damned archaic practice. We will court-martial that activity from now on. And I will see you brought on charges for this incident," Takagi gave a point of authority in the face of Leighton.

"The court-martial will wait. This is war, and we will do what must be done," Leighton coldly responded.

The Lieutenant turned away from the stunned Captain. Takagi was a man of principle. He believed that honor was sacred and virtue a noble practice. By contrast, Leighton stood for and represented all that Takagi despised. The Lieutenant, to Takagi, seemed to believe this war was game and they were playing by his rules.

The first of the three Zakus advanced down the street toward the radio station. The behemoth lined up its primary weapon, the 120mm machine gun, with the Federation stronghold. Leighton had just reentered the bombed out room when he saw the Zaku, with its weapon aimed directly at his position. There was no time to align the launcher and fire a shot. There was barely enough time for Leighton to order his men to find cover, when the Zaku fired.

The 120mm rounds tore through the radio station's facade, shredding the Federation soldiers inside. Enormous portions of the building's concrete virtually disintegrated under the unrelenting fire. Massive holes were bored through the sections where the Federation soldier had set up their own defensive positions.

The bombed out room soon filled with a choking dust; visibility was severely reduced. A section of the ceiling collapsed. Takagi had to shield himself from falling debris. Leighton got up from his prone position onto one knee. He noticed something strange by his side. It was an arm, still wrapped in the khaki sleeve of the Federation uniform. The shoulder joint was bloodied and mangled. The Lieutenant looked up. On the other side of the room, propped up against some rubble, was Miller. Miller with his left hand clutched the stump where his right arm had once been, coughing up blood the entire time. Leighton watched as Miller's eyes rolled back into his head and the private slumped forward.

"â€|Jesus fucking Christ!" Bukowski screamed at the top of his lungs.

A white trail of smoke followed closely behind a rocket. The rocket exploded in a brilliant flash that blew apart the lead Zaku's cockpit. Noble Company's other rocket launcher was still in action, just above Leighton's position. The Zeon behemoth shook violently and then fell to its left; crashing through the adjacent building. The shot had been a lucky one, as the Zaku pilot had been distracted. There would not be another.

The second Zaku stepped forward. It had already sighted where the rocket had been fired. Before the men at the launcher could get another rocket loaded, the Zaku opened fire. It was a punishing fire. In the fury of the moment, the Zaku pilot expended his entire 120mm thirty round magazine at the area of the rocket's origin. Luckily, the crew of the launcher, Tupolev, Nguesso, and Thompson, had the good sense to abandon their position immediately after firing. They ducked down a flight of stairs and avoided the retaliation.

Takagi, Leighton, and Bukowski regrouped with the survivors of Noble Company. The Captain gave orders to his men to rally the squad leaders of Fox and Golf Companies. The orders were to hold the radio station at any cost. It was a vital strategic resource for the beleaguered Federation army. Unfortunately, Zeon counter intelligent forces identified it as a listening post and ordered its immediate capture.

The word was passed amongst the squad leaders of Fox Company to get their men to cover and await the signal. It had been discovered that the men of Golf Company had fled the building, their stomachs no longer in the fight. Thompson, Tupolev, and Bukowski were sent to the radio station's control room, as the last line of defense for the intelligence officers who made ready to sabotage their equipment. Sergeant Tupolev was given Takagi's radio clearance with instructions to continuously call for air support until it was granted. Takagi assumed temporary command of Fox Company, as word had reached him that their Company Commander was killed during the first Zaku's salvo. The Captain had the men withdraw to the interior of the building and placed them in cover, to conceal them from the enemy's sight.

There was a disquiet silence that overtook the whole city block. The Zaku had ceased its firing. The Federation soldiers in the building that were not dead were still in cover. The first platoon of Zeon infantry approached the radio station. They slowly vaulted over the ruins and entered the structure. All around them were the mangled and shredded bodies of the Federation. Limbs and other body parts were

strewn about the rooms closest to the field of fire. It was a truly horrific sight and unnerved the hardened Zeon soldiers. A Zeon private stepped through the ruined doorway into a large atrium. Actually, it was no atrium; the ceiling had collapsed and thus increased the height of the room.

The Zeon private's hands trembled, as he held tightly to his submachine gun. The Federation soldiers that lay dead all around him looked to be about his age. He was only eighteen and pressed into a war against an enemy fashioned by the propaganda films. The silence was interrupted by the click of an assault rifle bolt. The sound a rifle makes when one is chambering a round. The private happened to glance up, at the missing ceiling. Stationed around the periphery were Federation soldiers, their weapons trained on the Zeon infantry. The life of the Zeon private flashed before his eyes. His miserable war was coming to an end.

Leighton ordered the men to open fire from their elevated position. The Federation rifles opened in unison. The shots tore through the exposed Zeon infantry that had wandered into the atrium. The Zeon private was the first to fall, several rounds fired from Leighton's M72Altore through his cheek, stomach, and limbs. Takagi was on the ground floor. He ordered the Federation soldiers under his command to rise from their concealed positions. They stood and delivered a hail of fire into the Zeon, who were already caught off-guard and focused on the elevated attack.

The initial wave of Zeon infantry that had entered the building were cut down, almost to a man. They were not deterred, however, and soon a new wave of Zeon infantry poured into the building. Their numbers were so great that they passed through the murderous fire of the atrium with most of their compliment intact, though a good number were cut down. The entrance to the building served as bottleneck for the Zeon. Though they outnumbered the Federation, they could only commit soldiers to the engagement in detail. The Zeon rushed forward through the bombed out and ruined walls. Takagi and his men engaged the enemy with a sustained fire at almost point blank range. But soon, the Zeon were on top of them. The Federation and Zeon soldiers fought hand to hand for control of the ground level.

Takagi expended the magazine of his M72A1. He paused to reload, but was rushed by a Zeon infantryman. The Captain swung the butt of his rifle and struck down his Zeon attacker. Another Zeon leaped up and tackled Takagi. The two wrestled on the ground, locked in mortal combat. Nguesso wanted to rush to the aid of his Captain, but he had a struggle of his own. The Zeon pulled a knife from their belt and tried to stab Takagi. The blade missed and impacted the broken tiled floor. The hands of Takagi were wrapped around the wrists of the Zeon soldier, as he tried to hold the knife away.

The scene around Takagi quickly deteriorated. It was impossible to tell which side held the upper hand. Just about every soldier was engaged in hand to hand or very, very close quarters combat. Soldiers violently wrestled each other on the floor. A Federation soldier would bash the skull of a Zeon soldier in with a chunk of concrete. A Zeon soldier would throw a Federation soldier onto a piece of exposed rebar; impaling the man. Takagi felt the tip of the blade pierce into his throat. With desperate bit of strength, Takagi kneed the Zeon soldier in the groin. It was enough for Takagi to take control of the situation. He flipped the temporarily stunned Zeon soldier onto the

ground and seized the knife.

Takagi now knelt on top of the Zeon soldier. This whole time it was female Zeon soldier Takagi realized he had been fighting. She seemed to no longer have the strength to put up an effective resistance and slowly raised her hands in a parlay fashion.

Several shots rang out. It was Leighton and his contingent of men rushing down a flight of stairs to enter the fray. The new Federation soldiers fired into the onrush of Zeon, cutting them down with effect. Leighton had a crazed look on his face. He seemed to be enjoying what was happening, like he was ready to hurt the Zeon. After Leighton had emptied his magazine, he held the empty rifle in his left hand while he drew his sidearm with his right. He fired several more rounds at the Zeon infantrymen. There was a round in Leighton's pistol he saved. When he recognized Takagi was combat he went to assist the Captain.

It looked like Takagi was about to take a prisoner. The Zeon infantrywoman had given up the fight; too tired to continue and soundly bested. Takagi got to his knees. He made ready to stand and bring the woman to her feet, when a shot rang out. The woman's body went limp and she collapsed, lifeless. Takagi turned with a rage at Leighton, who calmly dropped the magazine from his sidearm and replaced it with a full one. A nod of "you're welcome", though un-solicited, was given by Leighton. There was no time to fight with his subordinate over the atrocious behavior. This was war, as Leighton had previously mentioned to Takagi. Now, Takagi had to focus on staying alive.

Their position was untenable, the Zeon force too great. The men of Fox Company fought gallantly, but their defeat was inevitable. The Zeon still had two Zakus to commit. They had hoped to capture the radio station and the Federation surveillance equipment intact, but were also willing to have the Zakus level the structure. Though, capture of the Federation surveillance equipment would help the Zeon expose the weaknesses in their own communications.

Leighton fought like a man possessed. Takagi saw his Lieutenant brandishing his sidearm in one hand, firing wildly, and swinging an entrenching tool with his left. The pistol had fired its last round; Leighton threw it to the ground. He was out of spare magazines. A Zeon soldier rushed forward. To counter, Leighton buried the spade of the entrenching tool into the side of the Zeon man's face. The Zeon fell to the ground and Leighton followed. He grabbed a cylindrical high-ex grenade from the Zeon soldier's tactical vest. With a pull of the handle, Leighton armed the grenade and threw it. A large explosion engulfed the entrance of the radio station, where the Zeon reserves flowed in.

The onslaught ceased, as the Zeon did not commit any more troops to melee in the radio station. The remaining Zeon inside, which were not in the process of being finished off by the Federals, withdrew. Takagi stood up to survey the scene. He turned to see Leighton, whose face was soaked in blood. The surviving members of Fox Company rallied to Takagi.

"Your orders, Captain?" One of the sergeants, Ramirez, spoke up.

"What's our status?" Takagi replied.

"They come at us againâ€¦I don't think we can stop them."

Takagi took a look around, at the worn faces of the exhausted men. Barely one among them was unscathed. They all stood there, a motley collection of bloodied and battered soldiers. The Captain took a moment to debate the next course of action in his head.

The decision was made for Takagi. Both of the enemy's Zakus opened up with a punishing burst from their 120mm guns. The fire was concentrated at the lower level. The concrete, already blown away from the earlier fighting, was further reduced to fine bits. The rounds tore through the collection of Fox Company that still remained. Some men dove for cover, only to be blown apart as the Zaku rounds tore through walls. Takagi turned his head to see Ramirez disintegrate before his eyes.

Rubble covered the area while dust made it impossible to see. Men were choking, coughing all around. There were some that tried to escape; they tried to feel their way to an exit. A few made it to the rear door of the radio station and found themselves in a deserted alley. Others wandered blindly in the wrong direction, and were cut down by Zeon infantry as they emerged.

The Zakus had to stop to reload. The interior was once again quiet. The wounded moaned in agony. Leighton was lying on his back. He brushed the dust and debris from his fatigues. The silence was interrupted by a growing roar. This was not the sound of advancing Zakus. It had a more aerial distinction. Leighton recognized it immediately.

A pair of Saberfish fighters screeched, as they lined up for their attack run. The Zakus tried to turn and shift their weapons to intercept the Federation jets. The narrow and ruin choked streets made it difficult to accomplish this. One Zaku managed to get its arm caught in an adjacent high-rise office building. The other lost its footing and became unbalanced, as it backed over a property wall. This Zaku managed to stay upright, but its aim thrown off. The lead Saberfish locked onto the closet Zaku and fired.

Two high explosive Longbow missiles raced toward their target. The Zakus, already incapacitated or distracted, were unable to resist. The missiles found their first target; blowing two large holes in the first Zaku. The explosion killed the Zaku's pilot and effectively put the mobile suit out action indefinitely.

The second Saberfish lined up for the attack. With the aircraft on target, the Saberfish pilot armed and fired two Longbow missiles. The intense motion of the final Zaku becoming unbalanced was of serendipitous fortune. It was just enough movement to interfere with the Longbow missiles' tracking system. The first missile overshot the Zaku, passing just under the left arm. It impacted the ground behind, as there was no space for it turn and reacquire its target. The second missile, originally locked on to the chest piece, slammed into the Zaku's left arm and blew it completely off. This Zaku was still in the fight.

The Zaku's pilot immediately reacted. Mounted to each ankle of his Zaku were two rocket pods that contained four missiles each. Two

missiles were surface to air and meant for anti-aircraft purposes. Another two were anti-armor, reserved for destroying Federation tanks. The final four were high explosive rockets, designed to cause devastation over a large area. The pilot locked onto the Saberfish that had just attacked, and fired.

The surface to air missile streaked skyward. The Saberfish pilot rolled his aircraft, flew erratically, and even deployed countermeasure flares. They were all in vain, as the missile stayed on target. It impacted, blowing the Saberfish apart. It was enough to get the lead Saberfish to turn around and abandon the fight. The soldiers on the ground could hear it leave.

"What the hell are you doing!?" Takagi screamed into his headset.

"__Area is too hot with anti-air," _the Saberfish pilot replied over the channel. _"I used up both of my anti-mobile suit missiles. All I have left are the incendiaries. They'll cook the Zeke the infantry, but won't stop that Zaku. Take out the tall-boy and I'll circle back."_

Takagi pounded the ground next to him. He was incensed by the pilot's behavior. The thought had crossed his mind to bring the pilot up on charges, but that was not important now. The carnage in the radio station was becoming apparent to the Captain. He could see the dead and wounded strewn everywhere. All the Zeon needed to do now was press their attack, but they hesitated. It was unsure why.

"Who's left?" Takagi shouted.

A tense silence passed. Nobody responded to the Captain. He was about to shout again when Leighton emerged from the dust. The Lieutenant grabbed Takagi by the flak jacket.

"Will you keep quiet," Leighton said in a stern whisper. "I have an idea."

Leighton released his Captain and crept away. He was headed to the rear door of radio station. The one that opened to secluded alleyway. Takagi had the uneasy notion that Leighton may be trying to run, but that seemed unlikely. Leighton kept low and crept to the rear door.

In the alley, he found Noble Company's jeep. The jeep had remained, even after Golf Company had retreated. Bukowski feared what the Lieutenant would do if the jeep ever went missing. The Corporal always took steps to take the keys and disconnect the battery leads. Resting in the back of the jeep was a shoulder mounted surface to air rocket, colloquially known by its antiquated name the "Stinger". Leighton grabbed it along with his MIL-Book and a backpack that contained three extra rockets.

The roof was best the place to launch. It was where he would have an unobstructed view of the target. Leighton raced back into the radio station and then up the stairwell. A Zaku round had taken out the flight to the next level, so Leighton had to cut across the floor to reach another stairwell. The Lieutenant ran down the hallway. The hallway, incidentally, took him by the control room where Tupolev, Bukowski, and Thompson stood guard.

"Misha, come with me!" Leighton said, as he threw the Stinger to Tupolev.

Sergeant Tupolev followed the Lieutenant; leaving Bukowski and Thompson to remain at their post. The final flight of stairs had been scaled. Leighton bashed the roof access door open with his shoulder. The two men made their way over to the ledge that looked toward the Zeon position and went prone. They could see Zeon infantry taking up positions in the alleys and ruins that approached the radio station. 600 meters from the radio station was the Zaku. A group of Zeon soldiers, presumably field mechanics, had gathered around the serviceable Zaku. They were there to assess the damage.

"We're going to shoot that with this?" Tupolev spoke with hesitation.

"Just trust me," Leighton replied.

The Lieutenant plugged a wire from his MIL-Book into a port on the Stinger's guidance optics. Tupolev was hesitant for good reason. The rockets fired from the Stinger launcher were meant to defeat aircraft, not penetrate the armor of a Zaku. After a few moments, Leighton pulled up the schematics he had obtained from his project Zaku in the Bakaaraha Market. Ever since he had started analyzing the Zaku, he had been running the schematics through his engineering software. The search was for the Zaku's weak points. Leighton found what he was looking for. He began to upload the firing solution into the Stinger. The surface to air missile, though it lacked the destructive force to defeat Zaku armor, was fast and highly maneuverable. The maneuverability was the key to make this work.

The rangefinder was activated on the Stinger. Immediately, the Zaku came to life as it picked up the signal. Tupolev was confused why Leighton ordered him to acquire the Zaku with the rangefinder. The Zaku's sensors could detect target acquisition systems, like the one on the Stinger. For this reason, Noble Company had always fed preselected targets into their rockets when combating the Zakus. In this instance, Leighton wanted the Zaku's attention.

The ground crew scattered and the Zaku fired up its jump jets to get some elevation. This would allow the pilot to get a clear shot at the Federation soldiers targeting his Zaku. Leighton had hoped the pilot would do this very thing. The target point was locked into to Stinger and Leighton smacked Tupolev on the back; the signal to fire.

The Stinger missile jetted out of the launch tube at a high velocity. The Zaku's pilot was a bit stunned. The sensors immediately registered the missile as an anti-aircraft one. The systems on the Zaku immediately dismissed it because of its low threat probability. The missile screeched past the Zaku. The threat rating dropped, as the missile had overshot its target. Suddenly, the missile banked sharply and lined up for impact. Leighton had calculated it perfectly.

The Zaku was still airborne, the jump jets still at full thrust, when the missile impacted. The target was the thrust port of the Zaku's own jump jets. The missile exploded, with enough force it destroyed the values that safely diverted the jet thrust. A chain reaction ensued, as the exploding propellant surged back through the lines and

into the Zaku's interior. The Zaku exploded from the inside. The metal plates buckled, as fire burst through the tears. The debris from the Zeon mobile suit rained down onto the street below.

Leighton managed a genuine smile, proud in his accomplishment. He tapped Tupolev on the helmet in congratulations. Tupolev was completely stunned by the whole maneuver. There was no doubt in the Sergeant's; his Lieutenant knew what he was doing. Takagi saw the Zaku explode. Right away, he was on the radio and ordering the Saberfish back to finish the job.

The lone Saberfish came in low over the radio station. Leighton had been uploading the Zeon infantry positions, via his Mil-Book, to the Saberfish's targeting computer. Once on station, the Saberfish pilot released his incendiary bombs. The bombs tumbled down to the ground. They bounced maybe once or twice on the street before they erupted. A mass of fire and heat engulfed the buildings up the street from the radio station. Every living thing in the radius was instantly combusted. The immolation of the Zeon forces, caught within in the blasts, was enough to convince their reserves to pull back. Leighton celebrated the achievement with a drink from the flask on his belt.

The morning sun rose. The streams of light filtered through the many crevices and holes in the building to illuminate the battlefield. The soldiers of Noble and Fox Companies, those who were left, could breathe a sigh of relief. By their fingernails, they had managed to hold their position. Takagi stood up and walked through the devastated radio station. Two additional battalions had been sent up to occupy the radio station and the surrounding buildings. 5th Army headquarters had finally recognized the importance of the position and sent a larger force to defend it. The medics dashed about, as they rushed to tend to the wounded or recover the dead. Nguesso sat with his back against the wall smiling, as a medic tended a serious wound on his forehead. Other infantrymen set about laying sandbags and constructing barriers in order to fortify the position.

Takagi approached a group of men from Fox Company, the ones still able to stand. The men all had blank expressions on their faces, but it could also be seen that they were tired. When Takagi approached they all fell silent. A Specialist in their number raised his hand and saluted Takagi. One by one his comrades followed suit. It was not only a salute given to the rank, but it was also one given out of respect to the man. Takagi had led them through the night.

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In the control room of the radio station, one of the intelligence officers started to receive some radio traffic. It was definitely Zeon and sounded like a pilot on reentry. Whoever it was they sounded panicked. The pilot was screaming about being off course, about structural integrity. The transmissions were interrupted by static as the voice spoke. It sounded almost like a mayday hail. Then, the communications stopped. The intelligence office began to catalog the occurrence in the database.

On the roof of the radio station, Leighton sat in a lawn chair he happened to find up there. How it got up there was anyone's guess. It

was midday and the sun was getting hotter. He had fought all night and was exhausted, but it was too hot to sleep. In the sky, a shadow caught his attention.

A large olive capsule was falling; falling toward the city. The capsule was unmistakable. It was the massive capsule type that the Zeon used to deliver Zakus and other supplies to Earth from orbit. The capsule seemed to be wildly off course. Leighton understood the landing procedure for craft such as those, and there was no place suitable in the city. The capsule was indeed off course. The pilot had received hastily calculated entry coordinates. The designated landing site was to be 40 kilometers west of the city.

For several tense minutes, Leighton, along with a Federation sniper team stationed on the roof, watched at the capsule plummeted toward the ground. It made a deafening roar, as the capsule desperately fired its retro rockets to control its decent. The deployed parachutes had already been torn to shreds. The noise of the thing brought others, including Takagi, to the roof.

Finally, the capsule slammed into the city. The point of impact was an old stadium just north of the Jidka Sodonka. It was in Zeon controlled territory, but still within Federation grasp. Moreover, these were the capsule types that transported Zakus. There was little doubt the Zeon in this sector were running low on Zaku units. Naturally, it could be a safe assumption to presume there were replacement Zakus on board. If the Federation could take that landing site, they could potentially capture working Zakus.

"You wanted your foray into enemy territory," Leighton said, as he pointed to the crash site. "There is your opportunity."

Takagi smiled with enthusiasm. This could be his chance to lead an attack, one that could give the Federation an advantage in this war. It was his duty to lead such an attack. Leighton supported the idea, though his motives were entirely self-serving. He wanted a Zaku for own. That way he could study it in person and perhaps turn the hated enemy's grand weapon against them.

The soldiers on the rooftop let out a loud cheer at the capsule's impact. They felt it was a victory, somehow. They probably believed their own fighters had shot it down or had somehow forced it off course.

Leighton pulled the photograph out from his shirt pocket. The edges were tattered and worn from frequent handling. It was the photograph of his wife and child, the only thing he had left of them.

"I'll do it for you Ellie," Leighton said to the photograph.

The cheers continued at the downed capsule. For a demoralized army, it was a nice sight to see an enemy vessel come crashing down. Leighton placed the photo back into his pocket. He grabbed his M72A1, which was propped against a dented oil drum, and headed back to a lower level of the radio station. The plan was to find a cot and get some sleep. It would be needed in the coming days.

End
file.